

The Importance of Poetry in Japanese Heian-era Romantic Relationships

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by

Matthew Gerber
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Project Advisor: Professor Naomi Fukumori,
Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures

The romantic relationships of almost any foreign society are oftentimes confusing and unintelligible to outsiders, and aristocratic Heian-era (794–1185) romances are indeed no exception. When one considers typical courtship methods, “poetic exchange” may not be the first thing that comes to mind. But for a Heian-era aristocratic man, poetry was a necessity of romantic competition for the affections of young, impressionable Heian women. Modern day aspects of male attractiveness—physical looks, personality traits, and so on—were not as prevalent in a woman’s initial romantic calculations as they would be today, and did not result in arousing passions as one may expect. Instead it was poetry that fulfilled this important role. Through examining the literary works of the time, it is apparent that poetry is an extremely important component of aristocratic courtship. The purpose of this research paper is to demonstrate the importance of aristocratic love poems during Heian-era Japan and to explore the creative manipulations of conventionalized poetic exchange in Heian-era literature. This project will look at how poetry was essentially the only socially acceptable method of courtship available to men, how it served as an aristocratic woman’s best method for public representation to the world outside her home, and how poetry was romantically effective at arousing strong passions between lovers.

Japanese poetry (*waka*) has its roots in a long history of poetry pre-dating the Heian period. These earlier forms of poetry were based directly upon the Chinese styles from which they originated and include various types of poetry. The most important of these types, and that which was exchanged between members of the Heian aristocracy, was *tanka*—a fixed form consisting of thirty-one syllables written in a 5-7-5-7-7 poetic meter. Commonly composed entirely in Japanese, *tanka* lacks the Sinified pronunciations

characteristic of older forms of *waka* (Miner 1990, 670). Since its establishment, the conventionalized syllable count has remained virtually intact, preserving *tanka* as an accepted poetic form (19). When Heian aristocrats engaged in poetic correspondence, it was with use of *tanka*.

An exemplary collection of *tanka* from this period is the *Kokinshū*—the first of twenty-one imperial anthologies of compiled poetry. Completed in 920, The *Kokinshū* was assembled at imperial request by four prominent poets and is divided into twenty sections, or “books,” each reflective of a specific topic (such as the seasons, travel, and love). One of the four poets, Ki no Tsurayuki, authored the influential Japanese preface to the compilation (there is also a Chinese counterpart), and in his introduction he presents several essential aspects of *tanka*. Most importantly, Ki no Tsurayuki establishes the poetic ideals and conventions that are later embodied by Heian aristocrats in their poetry. However, such poetry did not serve merely as an aristocratic pastime marked by trifling superficiality. Rather, the poetic art was a reflection of an individual’s soul and a written representation of his/her unique, cultivated feeling.

This concept is referred to as the “affective-expressive” ideal, and the quality of all Japanese poetry from this point forward is judged according to it. In his preface, Ki no Tsurayuki explains,

The seeds of Japanese poetry lie in the human heart and grow into leaves of ten thousand words. Many things happen to the people of this world, and all they think and feel is given expression in description of things they see and hear. [...] It is poetry which, without effort, moves heaven and earth, stirs the feelings of the invisible gods and spirits, smooths the relations of men and women, and calms the hearts of fierce warriors (Rodd 35).

Tsurayuki expresses a conviction that outstanding poetry should be an intellectually spontaneous and emotionally powerful response to everything that human beings are

capable of experiencing. If we take this preface to be an embodiment of ideal poetic creation, then we have a clear, three-part standard representing the established poetic ideal. The first part of this standard is that there must be an “affective” component to elicit a deeply emotional response, and it must be sincerely emotional. The second part of this standard, the “expressive” component, is that the poem must capture the emotional affective component in proper poetic form using proper poetic technique. Finally, the third part is how well the inspirational “affective” element is balanced with the technical “expressive” element. Poetry that has been written in accordance with this established poetic ideal should likewise demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of these three components.

Despite this, Ki no Tsurayuki laments the reality that great poetry was limited to exchanges between the households of lovers:

Nowadays because people are concerned with gorgeous appearances and their hearts admire ostentation, insipid poems, short-lived poems have appeared. Poetry has become a sunken log submerged unknown to others in the homes of lovers. Poems are not things to bring out in public places as openly as the opening blossoms in the pampas grass (Rodd 40).

Not only is Tsurayuki introducing Japanese poetry, he is also employing metaphoric language in the form of prose to set an example of the type of language and expression *waka* should strive for. He utilizes expressions such as “a sunken log submerged” and “the opening blossoms of the pampas grass” to demonstrate how to write good poetry.

With the majority of skillful poetry originating in romantic exchanges between aristocratic lovers, it is no wonder that the largest topic of the *Kokinshū* by sheer amount of poems is love. Purposely ordered to clearly depict the progression and fluctuations of a courtly love affair, the five volumes of love poems of the *Kokinshū* establish a precedent

for all aristocratic love poems to follow. Volumes One and Two depict love in its developing stages of sentiment, Volumes Three and Four describe the suspicions and jealousy associated with affairs and Volume Five objectively reflects on the realities of love and desire. Referencing one of these works through allusion, and incorporating it into a personal poem—although conventional and expected—was considered very attractive.

For example, a typical “sensible” poem will reference the season or a seasonal event. The Heian aristocracy was particularly sensitive to nature and the seasons, and although images of nature were fixed to a limited lexicon of words, including at least one was a poetic requirement. This could be done with use of a “poem pillow” word (*utamakura*), a conventional place name with poetic associations that allowed for greater allusion within a composition, or with a “pivot-word” (*kakekotoba*), a homonym with double meaning that establishes an associative link between two unrelated concepts or things. The very first love poem of the *Kokinshū*, an anonymous poem, reads:

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| <i>hototogisu</i> | As cuckoo birds sing |
| <i>naku ya satsuki no</i> | in the purple irises |
| <i>ayamegusa</i> | during the fifth month, |
| <i>ayame mo shiranu</i> | it seems I’ve fallen in love |
| <i>kohi mo suru kana</i> | with no pattern to follow (Kojima 152). ¹ |

The poet recognizes summer has arrived upon hearing the call of the cuckoo bird.

“Cuckoo bird” (*hototogisu*), is a conventional season word signifying the beginning of summer, and would have been well-established within the poetic lexicon of the time. The first three lines are linked to the final two lines by the repetition of the sound in

¹ I have translated all the poems in this paper from their original Japanese texts, working from parsings provided by Professor Fukumori. My primary concern for translation was preserving the 5-7-5-7-7 syllable prosody of *tanka*. As an important secondary concern, I focused on accurately conveying the original meaning of the poems.

ayamegusa and *ayame*, and *ayame* functions within the poem as a *kakekotoba*. Aside from meaning “iris,” *ayame* can also mean “pattern”—namely the pattern of love. The allusions and double meanings are typical of romantic poetry. They are important for couching romantic sentiment within a poem: on the surface, the poet writes about conventional seasonal concerns or describes characteristic nature scenes, yet by discerning secondary meanings and “reading between the lines,” his true meaning is easily recognizable. In the above poem, the poet is not necessarily composing a poem about how the songs of the cuckoo bird and blossoming irises indicate the arrival of summer. Rather, the poet employs these conventional images to illustrate his feelings of loneliness and to highlight his involvement in a romantic affair that has no clear direction.

The ability of a word such as *hototogisu* to be associated with summer was due in part to its abundance in poetry. Simply filling in the first five-syllable line of the poem with this widely used five-syllable word conjures up images of early summer and sets the tone for the rest of the poem. Yet such expected poetic “shortcuts,” far from being considered unoriginal or uninspired, were widely employed by Heian aristocrats and all noblemen and women were expected to know them. How an aristocrat learned this knowledge differed between men and women.

A Heian aristocratic man’s education began at about the age of five (Shively 346). At a ceremony, the young boy would be required to read the first few lines from a classical Chinese text as a learned teacher instructed him (347). Following this ceremonious beginning, a young man would receive an education in classical Chinese text and writing through mostly a system of repetition and straight memorization (347). Memorization through repetition is also how an aristocratic man would have learned the

majority of his poetic knowledge, and by the time he reached adulthood, he would have been expected to be capable of composing an acceptable (though not necessarily skillful) poetic missive.

While no formal education system existed for women in the Heian period, aristocratic women were expected to complete intense training in poetry and calligraphy. Included in their education was a complete word-for-word transcription of the *Kokinshū*. One father's command to his daughter was "First you must study penmanship [...] and also you must memorize all the poems in the twenty volumes of the *Kokinshū*" (Morris 1991, 37). Obviously memorizing all 1,111 poems of the *Kokinshū* would have been no easy task, and the apparent absurdity of doing so illustrates the depth of the Heian-era passion for poetry. With the *Kokinshū* being the foundation for aristocratic poetic education, poetry became a critical component of both fictional and autobiographical literature.

It is meaningful to note that the majority of Heian literature was authored by women. Although women would typically have more free time than men (who would typically be immersed in their duties at court), women were discouraged from learning to read and write in Chinese. Comparable to the role that Latin fulfils in the West, Chinese was considered the language of scholars and court officials; it was reserved for exclusive use by men for any serious form of writing. However, women's prohibition from Chinese afforded them a unique opportunity to develop what was referred to as "women's writing" (*onnade*). Previously limited to spoken language and supposedly inferior to Chinese, *onnade* is simply vernacular Japanese in written form. Filled with enthusiasm and passion, pioneering women authors mastered this flexible written style to compose

the majority of the extant vernacular works from the Heian period. In addition to both personal and public poetry collections, much of Heian-era poetry has come to us preserved in the passages of stories and the entries of diaries written by women authors. Therefore, to understand poetry's influence over aristocratic courtship, and the creative manipulation of poetry within narrative developments, it is necessary not only to examine the poems themselves, but also the context in which they were written, and the literature in which they survived.

For the purposes of this paper, I have drawn examples from a number of literary works written during the Heian period. The five most closely examined works are three autobiographical works, *The Kagerō Diary* (*Kagerō nikki*), *The Izumi Shikibu Diary* (*Izumi Shikibu nikki*), and *As I Crossed A Bridge of Dreams* (*Sarashina nikki*), and two fictional narratives, *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*) and *The Lady Who Admired Vermin* (*Mushimezuru himegimi*). *The Kagerō Diary* (covers the years 954–974), written by Fujiwara Michitsuna no haha (hereafter referred to as “the Kagerō Lady”), recounts her less-than-ideal marriage to a high-ranking Heian aristocrat, Fujiwara no Kaneie. In contrast, *The Izumi Shikibu Diary* (11th century) narrates a successful love affair between the author, Izumi Shikibu, and a high-ranking nobleman, the Prince Atsumichi. *As I Crossed A Bridge of Dreams* (11th century) describes the travels and pilgrimages of Lady Sarashina, the author. *The Tale of Genji* (11th century) involves several major protagonists and plotlines. For this analysis, the most important are the Shining Genji (the son of an Emperor), Kashiwagi (a nobleman), Niou (the grandson of the Shining Genji and aspirant to the Shining Genji's legacy), Kaoru (the Shining Genji's purported son and best friend of Niou), Lady Murasaki (Genji's adopted daughter-then-wife), and Ukifune

(a noblewoman desired by both Niou and Kaoru). While *The Tale of Genji* provides abundant examples of Heian beauty and conventional ideals, *The Lady Who Admired Vermin* (c. 1055), in contrast, provides a significant parodic example of an unattractive noblewoman.

In addition to these major works, the Heian-era literary tradition is rich with other sources of artfully composed romantic poetry. The choice of these specific works is intended to provide an appropriate contrast between aristocratic realities and poetic ideals. By drawing examples from autobiographical works as well as fictional narratives, the examined poetry represents two literary extremes: the aristocratic poetry found in personal diaries and the conventional poetic ideal found in fictional narratives. While poetry found in autobiographical works does not necessarily represent a poetic reality (such poems were shaped by their surrounding prose contexts, therefore manipulating their effect), they do contrast sharply with the idealized romantic poetry found in fiction. In addition, poetry written for the widespread consumption by aristocratic society played with the familiar established poetic conventions and can be used to examine how literary works dynamically engaged with established poetic rituals to imbue narratives with maximum emotional effect as well as, occasionally, comic appeal.

Heian Marriage Customs and Polygamy

The importance of poetry as inter-sex communication originates from several distinct aspects of Heian court society. The most striking of these realities is the polygamist nature of Heian aristocratic marriages. It was customary for high-ranking men

to have an average of two to three wives, though the number was not necessarily limited to this amount. Fujiwara no Kaneie (the male protagonist of *The Kagerō Diary*) reportedly had as many as eight wives in real life, while the husband of Murasaki Shikibu (the author of *The Tale of Genji*) had three or four at the time of her marriage to him (Morris 1964, 221). With duolocal living conditions (*i.e.*, the woman living at her parent's house where the man could visit her—a common Heian-era practice) it was relatively uncomplicated for a man to maintain relations with more than one wife (W.H. McCullough 134).

Aristocratic courtship itself was standardized to a predictable pattern. Typically, a third-party match-maker would alert a man or his family to the availability of a suitable woman and arrange the necessary preparations to ensure an appropriate and successful union. If interested in the woman, the man would compose a poem adhering to the conventions and standards for love poetry outlined in the *Kokinshū*. Many poems directly reference through allusion *Kokinshū* poetry, and doing so was considered romantically insightful. Following a man's poem, a woman would immediately reply, as a slow response time reflected poorly on her character. Oftentimes her reply would be composed by an attendant or a member of her family, as revealing one's poetry too early in a relationship was considered prematurely intimate. The nobleman would closely examine a woman's reply, for if the lady is poetically tasteless, he can decide to bail out of the poetic exchange, effectively ending any possibility of a romantic relationship. If the noblewoman proved her romantic worth however, the man would begin preparations for arranging a "secret" meeting. The secrecy was just for show; the woman's family and ladies-in-waiting would have been well aware of what was transpiring. From their first

meeting, a prenuptial convention of three consecutive nights spent together was sufficient for the couple to be officially married. (Morris 1964, 214)

These marriage conditions were perfectly acceptable in the eyes of most aristocrats, and considering their nearly four-hundred-year existence, there was apparently little need to change them. Perhaps with good reason—a busy, high-ranking aristocratic man had an obvious practical need to marry. Well-cultured aristocratic women provided husbands with high-quality garments to be worn at court, incense, and sophisticated knowledge of culture and poetry that was indispensable to an aristocratic man. For example, Fujiwara no Kaneie of *The Kagerō Diary* was in constant attendance at court ceremonies and festivals and required a large wardrobe complete with fashionable clothing. Sonja Arntzen, the work’s translator, remarks that the Kagerō Lady’s “skill as a designer and seamstress may have been one of the qualities that attracted Kaneie to the author in the first place” (80). Following a period of estranged relations with the Kagerō Lady, Kaneie sends her two bundles of cloth along with a message reading simply, “Please, sew these” (Arntzen 81). The terseness of his message implies a practical need for the service and simultaneously demonstrates the duty a wife was expected to fulfill. As his request came during an emotional rift between them, the Kagerō Lady finds it distasteful and decides to send the fabric back. For more than twenty days there were no inquiries from Kaneie, and the author assumes that he must have found her refusal to be very cruel (83). His reaction to The Kagerō Lady’s response underscores his original expectation of her to sew his clothes for him. If Kaneie did not have such expectations of her, his original request may have been more considerate and he would have met her refusal with understanding rather than hurt silence.

With polygamy justified on the grounds of practical necessity, and women differing in their levels of proficiency in particular abilities, a man could likewise marry one woman for her poetic skill and another for her expertise in sewing. As we will soon see, aside from providing for a wife materially, a man had to simply maintain poetic correspondence to preserve such relationships. In reality however, monogamous relationships were probably more prevalent than polygamist ones, and the actual number of wives maintained would usually number to no more than two or three. Fujiwara no Kaneie, despite having eight times as many wives as he probably needed, in the end appears to have limited himself to just three (W.H. McCullough 134).

Regardless, these marriage customs placed considerable strain on a Heian woman to romantically out-perform her competitors in winning the affections of a nobleman. To promote her social position through marriage, a Heian woman would not only have to prove her worthiness in the eyes of a man, but also prove herself romantically superior over her competition. This meant that any form of personal representation, including poetry, would have been extremely important. In *The Tale of Genji*, the Shining Genji sends a potential wife, the Third Princess, a poem on white paper along with a white blossoming plum branch, but the reply is late in coming, “gaudily wrapped in thin scarlet paper” (Tyler 595). Genji’s heart sinks at the childish reply. He leaves the poem in the open for his wife Lady Murasaki to see, and she remarks that “the hand was indeed thoroughly childish,” and that “no one Her Highness’s age should write like that” (595). This glimpse of the Princess’s poem leaves Murasaki feeling relieved regarding her position as Genji’s favorite wife. The princess’s immature poetic reply in its unpolished style was not skillful enough to represent its sender as a formidable romantic competitor

to Lady Murasaki, and in this case, the princess's lack of poetic ability undermines her ability to romantically compete with Lady Murasaki over the affections of Genji.

With multiple, simultaneous wives a customary fact of the Heian married life, it would seem reasonable to expect clear delineations of marital status, but this is not the case. The difference between “wife” and “concubine” is rather indistinct, with custom—rather than strict legal code—dictating any discrepancies in status. It is clear that a man would typically recognize a primary wife, with any other wives socially inferior to her in both position and power. Usually, the primary wife gained her status simply by wedding first (W.H. McCullough 138). The prominence of any other wives would be based upon how many children they could bear, provided the wives are of equal rank. For example, in *The Kagerō Diary* the Kagerō Lady loses out to her competition Tokihime, as Tokihime is able to produce five children for Kaneie while the Kagerō Lady gives birth to only one (Arntzen 30). Despite this, the ambiguous class distinctions effectively allowed determined women, who grudgingly shared the affections of a nobleman, to position herself as romantically superior to his primary wife, and likewise win the majority of his affection.

This was the case with Genji's mother, the Kiritsubo Intimate, in *The Tale of Genji* who, despite intense social pressure and vile acts of jealousy, won the intense affections of the Emperor over her rival the Kokiden Consort. *The Tale of Genji* begins with a description of the relationship between the Emperor and the Kiritsubo Intimate:

In a certain reign, someone of no very great rank, among all His Majesty's Consorts and Intimates, enjoyed exceptional favor. Those others who had always assumed that pride of place was properly theirs despised her as a dreadful woman, while the lesser Intimates were unhappier still. The way she waited on him day after day only stirred up feeling against her [...] His Majesty, who could less and

less do without her, ignored his critics until his behavior seemed bound to be the talk of all. (Tyler 3)

The Kiritsubo Intimate was not the Emperor's primary consort. Rather, she was someone of unexceptional rank whom the Emperor favored over all his other consorts. It is apparent that although conventions for marital status existed, there was an established ideal portrayed by female authors of marital status being unrelated and inferior to emotional preferences. With emotion—rather than marriage customs—determining matrimonial demarcations of sentiment in literature, any form of romantic correspondence would have been extremely important in courtship.

The Sequestering of Women for Marriage

“Romantic correspondence,” however, was limited to poetry. Poetry's solitary responsibility for inter-sex communication owes its prevalence to the historical reality of an extreme physical, social, and visual separation of women from men. Men generally existed in a social “public realm” while women, by contrast, socially existed in a “private realm.” The public realm of men was characterized by public appearances at court, where they would be physically visible and socially accessible. On the other hand, the private realm of women was characterized by extreme isolation, sequestered away inside an inner chamber of a house and cared for by ladies-in-waiting. Likewise, the severe physical confinement of women naturally resulted in social remoteness and a disconnection from the world of men. This was all done as a means of “protecting” a woman from the advances of unqualified aristocratic men. With the young woman of a

household hidden away, a family rested easy knowing their daughter could successfully postpone marriage until the arrival of an acceptable suitor.

These practices—“marriage politics” as Ivan Morris has dubbed them—were remarkably influential in the romantic lives of Heian-era aristocrats (Morris 1964, 48–49). Their primacy implies that women were essentially marital barter tools to be auctioned off by their families to the highest ranking bidder. A woman who married into a better home promoted not only her own status, but also the status of all those associated with her. Most importantly, this included her family and ladies-in-waiting. Likewise, aristocratic families would enhance their positions in the Heian court by promoting and arranging advantageous unions between their daughters and high-ranking aristocratic men. While there existed no official consequence for a woman who married a man of lower rank, advantageous marriages were promoted by a woman’s interest, as well of her family’s, in enhancing the woman’s social position at court (W.H. McCullough 136–37).

In the “Suma” (*Suma*) chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, a low-ranking provincial governor learns of the protagonist the Shining Genji’s exile to the neighboring town of Suma. The Governor recognizes the lowly prospects available to his daughter, Lady Akashi, in their hinterland outpost, so he hears the knock of opportunity on the door of his heart when he gathers news of Genji’s arrival nearby. The governor “aspired to unheard-of heights,” and “his eccentric mind had never in all the years considered a single such proposal; but when he learned of Genji’s presence nearby, he said to his [wife], ‘I hear that Genji the Shining [...] is living in disgrace at Suma. Our girl’s destiny has brought us this windfall. We must seize this chance to offer her to him’” (Tyler 249). The governor is thrilled by the chance to marry his daughter to the son of an emperor, and

he does whatever necessary to ensure the union's success. To substantiate the benefits of marrying into a higher rank, Lady Akashi eventually bears a child with Genji—a child who becomes an Empress and gives birth to an Emperor. Lady Akashi's position, as well as the positions of her family and her child, is improved tremendously by her union to a high-ranking court official like Genji. With similarly rewarding incentives motivating the parents of young Heian women to propel their daughters toward socially and politically beneficial marriages, courtship methods such as poetry would have received a great deal of attention and importance.

Visually Sustaining Social Separation

To defend a woman against courtship from an undesirable, amorous man, a great deal of care and cultural convention surrounded the visual sequestering of aristocratic women to protect them from unwelcome eyes. By residing in the innermost chambers of a house, a Heian woman was protected somewhat architecturally, with any gaps in visual defense further fortified by all manner of screens and blinds. In addition, a woman's ladies-in-waiting, as her intermediaries to the outside world, would further protect her interests of privacy through mediating external communication, and constantly assuring that her various defenses were accounted for. In the event that a woman *did* leave her confinement, as with a religious pilgrimage or retreat, she was protected by her ox carriage in which she traveled, and her excessive layers of clothing and folding fan afforded additional means of covering and hiding her form and face. All of this visual protection supposedly established an effective defense against all but the luckiest of

curious men, and it was extremely difficult for men to gaze upon women, much less engage them in conversation.

A Heian woman could, in theory, live her entire life without seeing any man other than her father (Morris 1964, 213). The main female character of *The Lady Who Admired Vermin* is portrayed as an antithesis of the stereotypical Heian court lady. This work is unusual when compared to conventional Heian-era literature because it portrays an eccentric character set in contrast to the predictably elegant heroes and heroines of the conventional literature. Yet even the strange woman of this story understands the importance of remaining invisible to male eyes. She is of the opinion that “Devils and women are better invisible to the eyes of mankind,” and she expresses this view from behind a series of blinds cleverly aligned to provide maximum visual protection (H. McCullough 258). The comment is not presented to highlight the lady’s unusualness. Rather, it is introduced to illustrate that, despite her extreme eccentricity, “she was lady enough” to maintain this basic requirement of a noblewoman (258). Despite her disregard for her personal appearance and her preference for insects and vermin over poetry, allowing herself to be seen is a cultural taboo the lady is unwilling to break. Such extreme measures of visual concealment were engrained into the culture and women were specifically instructed to avoid men lest they break conventional female etiquette.

From this extreme isolation, poetry arose as a socially acceptable form of inter-sex communication. With women sequestered away inside their inner chambers, unable to leave or to be seen, poetry fulfilled the role of communicating with the outside world. Among members of the Heian aristocracy, it was customary to exchange poems on momentous or seasonal occasions and on holidays and special dates. To an outside

observer, such exchanges were not suspicious, and with poetry a trusted physical manifestation of an individual's sincere sentiments, there was perhaps no better medium for romantic correspondence. However, as mentioned previously, poetry was the *only* available courtship method for aristocratic lovers. To assert this, we must examine how methods we might now-a-days expect to be successful, such as visual and physical engagement of a woman, were ineffective at establishing a socially acceptable relationship in Heian-era Japan.

***Kaimami*—Peeping Through the Fence**

The “peeping through the fence” (*kaimami*) literary convention is a particularly inappropriate method of visually engaging a woman. Here, a man is able to look at a woman through a hole in her visual defenses. Like most courtship methods, these scenes become conventionalized and appear frequently in literature. While in actuality very unusual, *kaimami* are used in fictional narratives to imbue a visual encounter with dramatic significance. Because of the extreme isolation of Heian women, a nobleman wishing to reach a woman had to first steal a look at her through her many layers of curtains, screens, and blinds. Obviously, doing so was no easy task. A man would first disguise his court rank and purpose by carefully donning a hunting robe (unsophisticated rustic garments characteristic of low rank). This costume served a dual purpose: first to conceal his presence amongst the hedges and tall grasses commonly found outside homes in the Heian capital, and, more importantly, to disguise his true purpose for lingering in the vicinity of a woman's house. Oftentimes a nobleman's intentions for being in the area

were completely innocent, though it is safe to assume an unmarried aristocratic man would have always kept a sharp eye focused on a woman's residence.

A prototypical example of a *kaimami* scene occurs in the tenth-century work, *The Tales of Ise* (*Ise monogatari*), when a man of excellent courtly sensitivity is “hunting on his estate at Kasuga Village, near the Nara capital” (H. McCullough 39). Here we can safely assume that “hunting” refers to a search for attractive women and the line immediately following states that two beautiful young sisters lived there supports this assumption. Upon catching a glimpse of the women through a hole in their hedge, the man is described as losing his head and immediately composes a poem by tearing off a piece of his hunting cloak—dyed with a wild fern print of the Shinobu district—and using it to inscribe his poem:

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| <i>kasugano no</i> | Like the wild fern prints |
| <i>wakamurasaki no</i> | on this robe dyed young purple |
| <i>surigoromo</i> | from Kasuga Plain, |
| <i>shinobu no midare</i> | is the frenzy of yearning, |
| <i>kagiri shirarezu</i> | impassioned without limit (Watanabe 13). ² |

The poet equates the fabric's random moss-fern pattern to his confusion over his amorous affliction, implying that just like the vigorous imprinting of the pattern into the cloth, his attraction towards the poem's unspecified recipient is equally powerful. We are told in the accompanying text that his poem is an adaptation of an older poem involving a similar comparison between randomized patterning and amorous confusion, and it is presented in the context of demonstrating that people were once exemplary in their elegance. The poem's content portrays a *kaimami* scene that illustrates the emotional turmoil of one affected by gazing upon a woman.

² It is important to note that it is the “young purple” that is from Kasuga Plain—not the robe itself. The “wild fern print” was representative of the Shinobu district in modern-day Fukushima Prefecture.

The practice of *kaimami* was not similarly an innocent, amorous pastime of aristocrats however. Some scholars have even gone so far as to equate the assertion of a courtier's possessive "male gaze" to a form of visual rape. In her work, *A Woman's Weapon*, Doris G. Bergen equates the practice of *kaimami* in courtship to a male archetypal "hunt" (Bergen 1). Here, the unsuspecting women are the symbolic prey, and the hedges and grass from which courtiers spy upon them is the encompassing primitive jungle (1). Like a hunter in the wilderness the man is compelled towards forceful confrontation, but moved by convention, instead elects to express his urges through poetic composition—sending a passionate missive to his romantic prey (1). Taken at face value, *kaimami* are aristocratic practices necessitated by the visual sequestering of women. They appear on the surface as a form of aesthetic pleasure, yet carry deep undertones of aggressive tendencies and gestures. So just like the male archetype of raw force and aggressive confrontation presented by Bergen, *kaimami* are very striking and oftentimes result in surprisingly dramatic effects.

An example occurs in *The Tale of Genji* when Genji first catches a glimpse of the ten-year-old Murasaki in a *kaimami* scene. A quick look is all he needs to have his interest piqued enough to pursue a girl much too young for courtship. The young child is motherless and abandoned by her father, her care and upbringing the responsibility of an aging woman much too old to adequately fulfill the necessary role. Through a titillating tear in her fence, Genji views Murasaki in a moment of carelessness. He is particularly interested in the threateningly precarious social dangers looming over her young head, and sees in her helplessness the opportunity of raising a girl from childhood to be his ideal wife. Genji develops the passion for this endeavor from Murasaki's resemblance to

his ultimate desire, his stepmother Fujitsubo. Although Genji waits until the malleable Murasaki turns the socially acceptable age of fourteen to marry her, his insistence in taking such a young girl from her home and raising her on his own was highly irregular. The atypical success of Genji and Murasaki's socially unconventional relationship can only be attributed to their high ranks and the fact that Murasaki was truly alone in the world. This undoubtedly controversial action, the result of *kaimami*, demonstrates the dangerously climactic effects of scandalously gazing upon a woman through her visual defenses.

Women Revealing Themselves

A woman revealing herself to a man was equally disruptive to the typical courtship ritual. In *The Tale of Genji*, Kashiwagi (the son of Genji's friend Tō no Chūjō) catches a glimpse of Genji's wife, the Third Princess. This example is unique in its intensity, as the traditional *kaimami* scene is accompanied by a dramatic breach of Heian etiquette. During a game of aristocratic kickball (*kemari*) between Kashiwagi and friends at Genji's Roku-jo mansion, an accident takes place that eventually leads to Kashiwagi's horrible demise. A cat, being chased by a larger cat, runs through the blinds protecting the Princess and her women who are watching the game of kickball. It tangles itself and pulls her visual protection aside. The Third Princess is immediately exposed to the eyes of the men. The severity of the accident is compounded by the fact that not only is she dressed more casually than her women, but also because she is observed *standing*—a blatant disregard of courtly etiquette. The stepson of the Third Princess, who is present at

the time, is repulsed by her indecency. Kashiwagi, however, is amazed and feels immediately attracted to the Princess, perhaps in part because her obvious negligence of conventional female behavior affords him a rare opportunity to assess her visually. His illicit attraction does not end with this scene however (Tyler 620).

Kashiwagi finds in Kojijū, the niece of his nurse, a socially acceptable intermediary to dispatch a poem to the Princess:

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| <i>yoso ni mite</i> | I glimpsed from afar |
| <i>woranu nageki ha</i> | a flower I could not pluck. |
| <i>shigere domo</i> | Though my plight deepens, |
| <i>nagori kohishiki</i> | remaining is my passion |
| <i>hana no yuhukage</i> | for the flower's evening light (Abe, <i>et al.</i> , Vol. 4, 140). |

After witnessing such an obvious display of reckless exposure by the Princess, Kashiwagi feels no need for poetic restraint. His poem is explicitly erotic, making very clear allusions to his desire. Upon receiving the poem, the Princess reacts as an aristocratic woman should; she blushes deeply and maintains her expected civilized composure. Yet she remains indecisive regarding a reply, prompting Kojijū to reply emphatically on her mistress' behalf:

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| <i>imasara ni</i> | At this point in time, |
| <i>iro ni na ide so</i> | show not your true colors for |
| <i>yamazakura</i> | the mountain cherry |
| <i>oyobanu eda ni</i> | that you set your heart upon— |
| <i>kokoro kakeki to</i> | a branch far beyond your reach (Abe, <i>et al.</i> , Vol. 4, 141). |

Her stern rejection of Kashiwagi's obvious advance does little to deter him however.

Fueled by the memory of her shockingly unprotected physicality, the infatuated Kashiwagi continues to long for the Princess.

Kashiwagi's illicit attachment finally reaches fruition after six arduous years of craving. Due to relentless harassment from Genji, who discovers Kashiwagi's emotional

attachment to his wife, as well as Kashiwagi's feelings of dissatisfaction towards his inability to satisfy his desire, Kashiwagi becomes emotionally destabilized. The Third Princess does not necessarily encourage her lustful pursuer, though her unwillingness to discourage him prompts Kashiwagi to establish a tryst. Being successful in meeting with her, he physically forces himself upon her, and despite finding Kashiwagi's conduct disgraceful, the Third Princess does not resist him. After consummating his love, Kashiwagi suffers tremendously from a guilty conscience, compounded further when the Princess realizes she has become pregnant. His obsessively passionate feelings for the Princess, developed as the direct result of a brief moment of her unprotected physicality, eventually causes him to starve himself to death out of guilt. Had the cat never lifted her blinds, Kashiwagi would have never found himself in a position of irresistible urges towards an illicit love affair. By stressing the negative consequences of such visual encounters, it is obvious that looking upon a woman was emotionally overpowering and resulted in unpredictable results. As such, *kaimami*, in any form, were not an acceptable avenue for romantic pursuit.

Physical Encounters

Equally dangerous for the amorous aristocratic man was the initiation of a romantic encounter without a prior poetic exchange. Doing so was also considered unusual and extremely inappropriate. In *The Tale of Genji*, a nobleman by the name of Niou (Genji's grandson) has a reputation for being exceptionally romantic. Idling around his palace, Niou notices a page girl he does not recognize and follows her to a secluded

room of the house. Peering in, he notices sleeves of a fabric much too refined for a common gentlewoman. Taking advantage of the situation and surrendering to his characteristic appetite for romance, he catches the woman by the sleeves, sliding the door shut behind him. The woman, Ukifune, immediately hides her face behind her folding fan upon realizing the intruder is not one of her gentlewomen as initially thought. Niou takes her hand and begs Ukifune for her name, but the disturbance alerts the attention of her nurse who demands to know what is going on (Tyler 990–91).

Niou's invasion of Ukifune's chamber prompts reactions of shock and consternation from her women, and Ukifune herself is revolted by his feelings of indifference towards his intrusion. Niou's keen ability for eloquent speech however allows him to prolong his unwelcome visit well into the night. It is only upon receiving word that Her Majesty, Niou's mother, has fallen ill that he pulls himself away and feels suddenly embarrassed to imagine what others may think of him for his actions. He leaves amid a flurry of reproaches, and Ukifune's nurse describes his behavior as unacceptable—stressing that gossip regarding the events could be devastating for their mistress. Obviously such rash and sudden behavior was frowned upon, and neglecting the set social conventions was believed to be unwise and potentially socially destructive. Physical encounters without a prior poetic exchange, even if successful at consummating love, were unsuccessful at establishing a socially acceptable relationship (Tyler 991–92).

A man's attractiveness determined by poetry

With immediate physical audiences out of the question, perhaps it is encouraging to note that male attractiveness during the Heian period was not based on physical strength or brawn, but rather on softness and femininity. The Heian ideal of male beauty was remarkably similar to the Heian ideal of female beauty: a round, fleshy pale face with a tiny mouth and slender eyes (Morris 1964, 144). In this way, beauty was gendered with feminine characteristics as the preferred aesthetic. According to literary descriptions, the more closely a man resembled a woman, the more physically attractive a woman would have considered him. A notable gallant like Kaoru from *The Tale of Genji* is described on more than one occasion as being as beautiful as a woman, and we find women swooning at even the thought of his appearance. In addition, Kaoru's claim to romantic fame was his scent—a notably attractive characteristic for a Heian-era aristocratic man. Kaoru's name means literally “to smell,” and has a secondary meaning of “a beautiful face.” Kaoru's friend and competitor in love Niou has a name literally meaning “scent,” with a secondary meaning of “to have a beautiful aura.” As their names reflect their most notable characteristics, and with scent being a universally pervasive method of announcing one's presence, it is safe to assume the scent worn by a gentleman such as Kaoru was more important than his physical appearance.

A nobleman's epicene features were further accompanied by clearly effeminate behavior. On his trips to Uji, a city nearby the Heian capital, Niou is terribly frightened of being accosted by highway bandits, and while waiting outside Ukifune's doors, is dreadfully afraid of barking dogs (Tyler 1041). The description of his timid behavior is

not intended to highlight weakness on his part, but rather represent his attractive degree of sensitivity. Through displays of their softer emotions, a Heian man was able to show his sensitivity to the beauty and pathos of life—guaranteed ways to win the heart of a young aristocratic woman.

The emotional effectiveness of a man's effeminate behavior was almost as persuasive as poetry itself. When Prince Niou is waiting outside of Ukifune's household, Jijū, one of Ukifune's ladies-in-waiting, adamantly refuses his entry. Niou's servant, Tokikata, tries everything he can think of to persuade the stubborn woman to let down her guard, but to no avail. It is only when Niou begins to weep over the thought of being wounded when dismounting his horse to speak with her in person, that the compassionate Jijū becomes particularly sad, stressing that she "could not have ignored anyone so beautiful, even if he had been her worst enemy in demon form" (Tyler 1041). In fact, shedding tears is not uncommon. An exquisitely sensitive nobleman would be expected to cry at the thought of a morning departure from his lover, a change in the seasons, or in a moment of compassion (Morris 1964, 145). An especially moving poem would oftentimes be accompanied by tears, and themes of "wet sleeves" and "floating pillows" (a euphemism for crying so much that one's pillow floats away) are all too common. After Prince Niou and Ukifune spend their first night together, he composes a poem that brings him to tears:

*nagaki yo wo
tanomete mo naho
kanashiki ha
tada asu shiranu
inochi narikeri*

Though we rely on
love enduring forever,
the true sadness is
that we don't even know what
life tomorrow will be like (Abe, *et al.*, Vol. 6, 124).

Although Niou acknowledges the uncertainty of life, he creates a contrast between its unpredictability and the enduring quality of the love he shares with Ukifune. The apparent contrast, and his realization that it will be difficult to arrange future meetings with his lover, brings him to tears and reminds readers of the prince's elegant sensitivity.

From this, it is easy to see how a man's desirability was greatly influenced by his skill at emotional expression. Yet there was no better form for emotional expression to take than that of poetry, with its trusted representation of a man's sensitivity and emotional sincerity. A man's poetry was considered a genuine manifestation of his sensitivity, and his poems were emotionally superior to physical appearance in assessing his attractiveness. As such, a courtier's attractiveness was determined by how well he could express himself poetically, and poetic exchanges were essential for a man to prove himself desirable in the eyes of a woman at court. The abundance of poetry in the literature indicates an obsession with poetic ability, and points to poetry as being an essential ability to win the heart of a lover. In essence, a terribly unpoetic man was unbelievably unromantic in the eyes of his love interest, and while a relationship may develop in situations where the woman's family prefers such a union, it would not be a union forged from romantic sentiments.

Unpoetic Men Unattractive

Unromantic poetic approaches are illustrated in the beginning of *The Kagerō Diary*, where the author, the Kagerō Lady, is disappointed at the poetic missives sent

from Fujiwara no Kaneie (a high-ranking nobleman). His initial poem to her is considered by its recipient as less than ideal:

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| <i>oto ni nomi</i> | Isn't it sad to |
| <i>kikeba kanashi na</i> | only listen to your song |
| <i>hototogisu</i> | cuckoo bird? |
| <i>koto katarahamu to</i> | My heart's only desire: |
| <i>omohu kokoro ari</i> | if I could just speak with you (Inukai 10). ³ |

Following the poem she notes, “and that was all,” demonstrating his failure to meet her expectations. His verse does not adhere to the conventional 5-7-5-7-7 syllable pattern, with the final two lines being hypermetric, and despite suggesting the season with use of cuckoo bird imagery, does not extend into any creative language use. In addition, the paper Kaneie has chosen is different from the kind typically chosen for love letters, and his handwriting is described as being unbelievably bad. In fact, the Kagerō Lady is actually quite confused. Her expectations of romantic poetry exchange, undoubtedly shaped by romantic tales, are that such poems would be written perfectly with the utmost care and consideration for the choice of paper and calligraphy. Yet Kaneie’s poem is written casually, and she and her women have difficulty deciding if she even has to respond to such a poem. They assume his missive could not possibly be a serious poem of proposal as would have been expected.

The Kagerō Lady’s mother eventually convinces her to reply, although through a surrogate, and many future missives sent from Kaneie are left unanswered. The Kagerō Lady’s impression of Kaneie is ruined by the poor quality of his poetry. Her lack of responses and original refusal to write in her own hand proves that, despite having never met him in person, the Kagerō Lady is not initially romantically interested in a man who

³ Despite breaking the 5-7-5-7-7 meter, I have translated *hototogisu* as “cuckoo bird.” This tends to be the conventional translation for this particular word.

writes poetry poorly. This connection demonstrates that a man's attractiveness was mostly determined by how well he could express himself poetically, and likewise how important poetry was to an aristocratic man in courtship (Arntzen 59).

Women's Attractiveness

Poetry, as a woman's only method of representation to the outside world, also served as an accurate assessment of a woman's attractiveness. In "The Broom Tree" (*Hahakigi*) chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, Tō no Chūjō (Genji's best friend, friendly rival, and brother-in-law) wishes to see Genji's collection of love poems not only because they express Genji's interest in women, but because Tō no Chūjō is interested in the women themselves. He explains that it is precisely the poems that Genji finds personal and potentially embarrassing that interest him, stressing that poetry worth reading is that which is sent when the poet "was angry, or when dusk was falling and she anxiously awaited her lover's coming" (Tyler 22). With men enthusiastically interested and closely scrutinizing women's poetic replies, a woman's sole method of representing herself was also her most personally revealing. Everything from a woman's calligraphic skill to the paper she chose was reflective of her character. In addition, how long she waited prior to forming a response to a man's poetic advances, as well as the effect that a woman initiating a poetic exchange would have on a man are all important considerations that greatly affected a man's impression of her. Clearly, the important component of the poetic representation is not merely the poem itself (though this, of course, was an important element), but also all the details of the entire "poetic package": the ink used,

the paper chosen, the method of folding, the appearance and composure of the messenger, and the decorative element to which the poem may be attached.

Izumi Shikibu, the author of *The Izumi Shikibu Diary*, was particularly knowledgeable and skillful in utilizing her poetic package to win the affections of noblemen. So proficient was she at the exchange of poetry that she earned a reputation of romantic recklessness from her fellow courtiers and her desire to explain her indiscretion may have been a leading cause for authoring *The Izumi Shikibu Diary* (Cranston 27–8). Her first marriage was to the son of an emperor, and so skillful was she at gaining his love that it is believed he died as a result of trying to visit her during a plague. After his death, Izumi Shikibu began to poetically flirt with her late husband's brother, Prince Atsumichi. While their initial poetic exchanges were completely innocent, Izumi Shikibu's skillful poetic flirtations quickly led the correspondence to an advanced affair. She is able to poetically outperform the Prince's primary wife to not only win his affections, but also conclude their courtship in marriage.

While men were receptive to poetry's ability to publicly represent their desired woman, it was a lady's handwriting that most interested them. There are many instances in Heian literature of men's compulsive observance of a woman's calligraphy, and sometimes an aristocratic man would poetically beg a woman to grant him the honor of seeing her personal handwriting. As the physical manifestation of a woman's character, receiving a poem composed and written in a woman's own hand is a necessary factor for evaluating her character. In *The Kagerō Diary*, Fujiwara no Kaneie does not immediately receive a reply from the Kagerō Lady in her own hand, and her choice of a surrogate to write her poetry grieves him to no end. He sends many poems, beseeching her to reply

without the use of a substitute writer. While looking at a poem he has received from her household, he writes, “While I am glad to have your seemingly serious response, if this time again there is nothing from you yourself, how painful it will be,” and in the margin he inscribes:

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| <i>idzuretomo</i> | Despite who wrote it, |
| <i>wakanu kokoro ha</i> | it is your unknown heart that |
| <i>sohetaredo</i> | accompanies it. |
| <i>kotabi ha saki ni</i> | But this time I address the |
| <i>minu hito no gari</i> | one who has remained unseen (Inukai 12). |

The pleading tone of his poem requests a reply from her personally, and while he is happy to receive a reply from those associated with her, he desires above all to receive poetry from her personally. Without this, he cannot gain a feeling for her character. With her poetry as the only available and trusted representation of her character, great emphasis is placed on her handwriting. The Kagerō Lady knew that by revealing her personal script to him, she would be taking a clear first step towards increased levels of intimacy. By delaying the appearance of her personal penmanship in the poetic replies returning to Kaneie from her household, the Kagerō Lady is able to delay the progression of their relationship.

With poetry as a woman’s only representation to the world, a Heian lady could effectively control how (and if) a relationship progressed through careful management of her poetry. If truly uninterested, it would seem that a woman could compose a tasteless poem and disguise her script as indelicate and vulgar—dissuading almost any respectable aristocratic man. However, this does not appear to be the case, as even when a girl is truly uninterested (as with arranged marriages), social restraints, filial piety, and pleas from her

ladies-in-waiting force her to represent herself in a favorable light. This was primarily done as a preventative measure against damaging a woman's good name.

As poetry was a woman's face outside of her home, it would have been important to constantly maintain it with the highest degree of care. It is with this knowledge that Genji develops a vested personal interest in his adopted child/love interest Murasaki's cultural upbringing, specifying precisely which books and poetry she should read and study. When Genji does not attend his court duties for several days, it is with the intention of compiling books to serve as calligraphy models for her poetic education. He even goes so far as to train her personally, by composing a poem in her presence and instructing her on how to properly reply. Genji's attentive instruction of Murasaki demonstrates that developing a woman's public poetic face was an utmost concern of a noblewoman's cultural and social upbringing. In Murasaki, Genji sees the possibility of raising a woman to be his perfect wife, so the considerable care placed on her poetry reflects its importance as an attractive characteristic of a woman (Tyler 108).

In addition, refusing to reply to poetry was generally considered uncultured and disrespectful. A woman was forced by convention to respond to a man's poem, yet the same was not expected from a man. For example, of the twenty-two poems of the "Drifting Boat" (*Ukifune*) chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, Ukifune leaves only one unanswered, and she attributes her silence to personal illness (Heinrich 153–58). In contrast, all seven of Ukifune's replies to both Kaoru and Niou remain unanswered. Even the strange woman in *The Lady Who Admired Vermin* is requested by her women to respond to a man's poem, despite their obvious knowledge that she lacks the poetic skill to do so in a respectable manner (H. McCullough 260). Apparently, not responding at all

is viewed as a greater poetic sin than tastelessly responding, and the significance of a reply demonstrates the importance of maintaining a woman's reputation through poetic exchanges.

However, in particularly extraordinary situations, a woman could use the convention of mandatory responses to her advantage. Such is the case in *The Tale of Genji* between a Captain and Ukifune (Tyler 1089). When the Captain learns of Ukifune's existence, he sends her a poem professing his love and his desire to have her for himself. However, because she wishes only to renounce the world and take tonsure (*i.e.*, enter the Buddhist nunnery), she is quite stubborn in her refusal to reply to him. She continues to poetically hide from him, and is able to ignore his poetic advances long enough to fulfill her wish of rejecting this life. As it would not have been socially acceptable for the Captain to present himself to her any other way than through poetry, Ukifune is able to have a slight degree of authority over her fate by refusing to engage in poetic exchanges. This effectively demonstrates the power that poetry—or the lack of—could have over courtship.

It may also be worthwhile to examine the social effect of a woman presenting herself with poor poetry. In “The Imperial Progress” (*Miyuki*) chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, a woman by the name of Ōmi no Kimi unabashedly expresses her inability to compose elegant poetic verse. Genji's friend Tō no Chūjō (Ōmi no Kimi's father) teases her for her ambition of becoming a Mistress of Staff (a high-ranking lady-in-waiting position), and jokingly suggests she should plead her cause to the Emperor himself. He suggests she compose a poetic petition, elegantly worded and inspiring, but in vernacular speech and of a different length than the type typically used in poetic communication.

Knowing full well her inability to compose an attractive poem, as well as the ridiculousness of composing such an inelegant poem for the Emperor, Tō no Chūjō is making a joke at her expense. Unaware of his humorous insincerity, Ōmi no Kimi becomes excited at the prospect and immediately declares her intention to do as he has suggested. The gentlewomen who overhear the conversation laugh so intensely they are forced to slip away in fear of publicly losing their composure. Afterwards, Tō no Chūjō declares that her ability to please him is her only useful function in life. Obviously, the inability to compose poetry was not simply viewed as a lack of a desirable quality, but rather as a socially distasteful condition that is perfectly acceptable to draw attention to for the purposes of personal amusement. We are left to assume that Ōmi no Kimi's marriage prospects would have been considerably limited, despite her having a socially prominent father in Tō no Chūjō.

Bold Women: Women Initiating First

While the Heian convention was for men to initiate a poetic exchange, there are several literary instances where a woman intentionally contradicts customary practice to pursue personal volition. In “The Twilight Beauty” (*Yūgao*) chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, a woman by the name of Yūgao writes a poem on a fan and has one of her women send it along with a moonflower to Genji. For Yūgao, who is presented in the tale as being shyly reserved and rather demure, this is seen as a remarkably audacious approach. In fact, most women who initiated a poetic exchange were considered a little unusual, and men

would oftentimes label them as being particularly astonishing and even inappropriately brazen.

An especially illustrative example of this surprise effect occurs in the “Heart-to-Heart” (*Aoi*) chapter of *The Tale of Genji* and involves an exchange between the Dame of Staff and Genji at the Kamo Festival (Tyler 170–71). To underscore her unusual audacity, the author highlights her initiation of an exchange with this poem:

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| <i>hakanashi ya</i> | Oh it is too sad, |
| <i>hito no kazaseru</i> | due to the “meeting day” plant |
| <i>ahu hi yuwe</i> | worn this very day, |
| <i>kami no yurushi no</i> | I waited excitedly |
| <i>kehu wo machikeru</i> | for this day blessed by the gods (Abe, <i>et al.</i> , Vol. 2, 23). |

The poem is presumptuous and suggestive. She utilizes a *kakekotoba* in *ahuhi* referring to both the plant the festival is named for, as well as the phrase for “day to meet.” Her poem is skillful, but it irritates Genji enough to reply angrily:

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| <i>kazashikeru</i> | Your fondness for me |
| <i>kokoro zo ada ni</i> | is a waste of your feelings |
| <i>omohoyuru</i> | when you come to think |
| <i>yaso ujibito ni</i> | that there are eighty clans here, |
| <i>habete ahu hi wo</i> | all of them meeting today (Abe, <i>et al.</i> , Vol. 2, 23–24). |

Through his reply, Genji is making it apparent that he finds the Dame of Staff’s shamelessness of initiating a poetic exchange annoying and inappropriate. He uses the same imagery of a day of meeting to question her boldness. It is obvious to him that anyone with any amount of decency would have respected the fact that Genji was clearly with Murasaki (her sleeves would have hung from the carriage), and would have refrained from rashly initiating an unwarranted poem. Through Genji’s reaction to this woman’s audacity, it is clear that brazen poetry was associated with lewdness in a

woman's character, demonstrating the weight that poetic exchange could hold over a man's romantic impression of a woman.

A second example occurs in *The Kagerō Diary* where a majority of poems sent from the Kagerō Lady to Kaneie are in response to his poetry. Even during shared moments of resentful quietude, it is usually Kaneie who is the first to break the silence with a poem. But when Kaneie mistakenly leaves a poem intended for another woman in the Kagerō Lady's writing box, she is shocked by his infidelity. Hearing news of his stay of three consecutive nights at another woman's house (signifying marriage), her suspicions are confirmed and she is emotionally humiliated. When Kaneie comes knocking at her gate, she refuses him entry and composes a poem. Attached to a fading chrysanthemum, her poem is particularly audacious:

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| <i>nagekitsutsu</i> | Constant sorrowing, |
| <i>hitori nuru yo no</i> | a night of sleeping alone |
| <i>akuru ma ha</i> | until dawn arrives: |
| <i>ika ni hisashiki</i> | How long do such nights feel? |
| <i>mono to ka ha shiru</i> | Now you will surely know too (Inukai 20). |

Out of all the poems in *The Kagerō Diary*, this is perhaps the most well-known (Arntzen 70). Since women were commonly waiting longingly for their husbands' visits, it was inconceivable that a Heian woman would intentionally lock the door to her husband. Such courageous action necessitated the use of a particularly poignant poem. In reference to this poem, Sonja Arntzen notes, "In the Japanese poetic tradition, there are hundreds of poems expressing a woman's chagrin and sorrow at waiting alone though the night in vain for her lover to come, but this is perhaps the only poem by a woman who intentionally barred access to the lover" (70). As such, the Kagerō Lady takes more than special care at composing her daring poem, and anxiously awaits Kaneie's reply. It would

appear a woman's option of initiating a poetry exchange was limited to exceptionally unceremonious occasions, and the instance of the Kagerō Lady's rejection of Kaneie's visit is a remarkable example.

Poetry Emotionally Effective

Despite poetry's importance in publicly representing women, poetry's most influential characteristic was its sincere emotional sensitivity and expression. Because it was a trusted physical manifestation of an individual's character, poetry was romantically effective at arousing strong passions between lovers. Particularly important poetically was a poem's expressed sentiment and poetic technique. As Ivan Morris describes in his appendix to *As I Crossed A Bridge of Dreams (Sarashina nikki)*, the surest ways to the heart of a shy young Heian woman was through evoking *mono no aware* and demonstration of poetic skill (Morris 1971, 135). *Mono no aware* is similar to the affective aesthetic established in the Japanese preface to the *Kokinshū*. It is a sensitive appreciation of the pathos or sadness of life. So to "knock a girl off her feet," a man would show the conventional sensitivity and subtly express deep sentiment through his poetry. The importance of doing so can be demonstrated through a recipient's reaction to a poem, and through such reactions it becomes clear that poetry was emotionally effective in courtship.

In *The Tale of Genji*, Genji composes a poem for Lady Akashi that demonstrates an "attractive" poem exceptionally well:

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>wochikochi mo</i> | Gazing mournfully |
| <i>shiranu kumowi ni</i> | at the cloud-dwelling, unknown |

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| <i>nagame wabi</i> | whether far or near: |
| <i>kasumeshi yado no</i> | I ask after the person |
| <i>kozue wo zo tofu</i> | of the misty residence (Abe, <i>et al.</i> , Vol. 2, 238). ⁴ |

Recognizing Lady Akashi as a rare beauty with very high standards, he sends his poem on tan Korean paper (expensive and elegant) to demonstrate his poetic skill. Lady Akashi's emotional response is particularly noteworthy:

When [Lady Akashi] took a very long time to reply, [her father] went in to urge her on, but she refused to heed him. Genji's dazzling missive so awed her that she shrank from revealing herself to him, and agonized thoughts of his station and hers made her sufficiently unwell that she had to lie down (Tyler 266).

The mere thought of a man who is able to write as beautifully as Genji only makes her want to cry. Her excessive reaction of astonishment illustrates perfectly the considerably emotional effect a simple poem could have on a young, impressionable Heian woman. The effect is so great that her father must write her reply for her before she can even gain her composure to reply in her own worthy hand.

The diction and calligraphy of Lady Akashi's eventual response to Genji is also worthy of consideration. Written on heavily perfumed paper in fading black ink, Genji describes the calligraphy and diction of her response to be worthy of the greatest lady in the land:

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| <i>omohuran</i> | I am wondering |
| <i>kokoro no hodo ya</i> | to what degree your heart longs. |
| <i>yayo ikani</i> | How likely is it |
| <i>mada minu hito no</i> | that you worry about a |
| <i>kiki ka nayamamu</i> | person you have not yet seen? (Abe, <i>et al.</i> , Vol. 2, 240) |

Such an aesthetically pleasing exchange brings Genji's mind to the capital, and his waiting wife Lady Murasaki, and he feels with the pain of guilt that he should be so

⁴ The imagery that Genji employs is suggestive of a person who is far out of reach. For example, "cloud-dwelling" (*kumowi*) and "misty residence" (*kasumeshi yado*) imply one who lives amongst the clouds. Genji has learned that Lady Akashi, primarily due to her father's influence, has very daunting standards for prospective suitors. Recognizing this he uses these poetic conventions in his missive.

attracted to Lady Akashi. Pleased by her poetry, he wishes to write her more often, but is stopped only by the recognition that it would be unbecoming of him. In this case, a woman's exceptional poetic skill is romantically effective at winning Genji's affection, even though he has not yet even met her in person. Lady Akashi's poem and Genji's emotional reaction to it demonstrate that with visual evaluation initially impossible, the responsibility of assessing the attractiveness of a woman rested solely with poetry's ability to convey a woman's character.

Another example of an attractive poetic package is Yūgao's initial poem sent to Genji. She sends him a fan deeply impregnated with the scent of its owner and charmingly inscribed with a poem:

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| <i>kokoro ate ni</i> | Just making a guess, |
| <i>sore ka to zo miru</i> | but I see you are the one. |
| <i>shiratsuyu no</i> | The white-colored dew |
| <i>hikari sohetaru</i> | has added its light to the |
| <i>yuhugaho no hana</i> | flower named after the moon (Abe, <i>et al.</i> , Vol. 1, 214). ⁵ |

By equating this unknown visitor to the dew and herself to the flower, Yūgao is demonstrating her poetic skill. The choice of the fan to go along with the moonflower (*yuhugaho*) recently picked by Genji, and the scent she imbues it with, further illustrate her skill at poetic exchanges. Examining her poem with the greatest scrutiny, Genji recognizes her writing as being disguised, but can not ignore its “grace and distinction” (Tyler 57). Considering the poem to be a trustworthy indication of its sender's character, he is moved by interest and wishes to learn more about her. He sends Koremitsu (his aide) to investigate further, despite the deteriorated condition of Koremitsu's mother whom Genji is supposedly visiting. Through the details of her poetic package, Yūgao (the low-

⁵ To maintain the 5-7-5-7-7 meter, I was forced to be creative with my translation of *yuhugaho no hana*. Typically this is simply rendered as “moonflower,” and I refer to it as such throughout the paper.

ranking daughter of a provincial governor) is able to represent herself as a desirable female entity worthy of pursuit even by the likes of Genji (the Emperor's second son). From Genji's reaction and subsequent actions, the effectiveness of Yūgao's poetic representation of her attractiveness is apparent.

On the other hand, an "unattractive" poem could have an equally powerful emotional effect on the receiver, albeit a negative one. In *The Lady Who Admired Vermin*, the heroine writes a poetic reply on a very stiff and coarse piece of paper that is entirely unsuited for poetry (H. McCullough 260). Compounding her tastelessness further, her inexperience with calligraphy forces her to write entirely in a childish angular script. With his curiosity piqued by the poem, a certain young man arranges a visit with a friend to see what type of strange girl would send such an eccentric and abnormally composed poem. Their discovery demonstrates that unattractive poems can have seriously adverse effects. Rather than pique his romantic interest, the heroine's bizarre poem makes the man only interested in seeing what type of strange woman publicly represents herself with unattractive poetry. The author uses the insect-loving lady's tasteless poetry to underscore her unusualness, and the reader is left to assume that it would be extremely difficult for her parents to marry her off with her poetic portrayal in such ineloquent disarray.

Poetry Emotionally Superior

To gain the affections of a nobleman, an aristocratic woman had to simply represent herself as a desirable entity through poetry. In addition to the fact Heian men

rarely actually see a woman until the morning after sleeping with her, poetry's importance in arousing desire can be attributed to its superiority over physical appearance and behavior in judging a woman's romantic quality.

In *The Lady Who Admired Vermin*, a certain Assistant Director and Middle Captain pay the insect-loving woman a visit to investigate the strange rumors that surround her person. Even though they find the lady's peculiar appearance and behavior to be incredible, it is her poetry that is most astonishing. Receiving a poem attached to an outrageous gift of a fake snake in a bag prompts her to send a reply to the gift giver:

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| <i>chigiri araba</i> | If a vow exists, |
| <i>yoki gokuraku ni</i> | we will meet again in the |
| <i>yukiahamu</i> | lovely paradise. |
| <i>matsuwarenikushi</i> | It's difficult to involve |
| <i>mushi no sugata ha</i> | oneself with an insect's form (Tsukahara 55). |

The poem underscores her unusualness. Gone are the conventional aesthetically pleasing images and allusions, instead replaced with an undisguised warning to the recipient to maintain his distance from the poem's author. She employs inherently unromantic religious connotations of an afterlife, indicating prospects for becoming a lowly insect. Augmenting her atypical poetry further, she writes on coarse paper entirely unsuited for poetry, and does not write in calligraphic cursive as would have been expected. Although we are informed that news of the lady's behavior and appearance spread all over the capital, it is this poem in particular that interests the Assistant Director enough to plan an incognito visit to her house.

Accompanied by the Middle Captain, his visit is a conventional *kaimami* scene, but rather than a secluded beauty, he discovers a woman with a complete disregard for her personal appearance. Regardless, the Assistant Director laments that if she used

cosmetics she would actually be rather attractive, stressing that only her unique behavior results in the rumors surrounding her name and not her actual physical appearance. It may be interesting to note that even with such an unconventional woman, the power of *kaimami* to encourage passion is still apparent in the Assistant Director's attraction towards her. Despite having spent some time freely watching the woman play with her creatures, the Assistant Director is not satisfied by simply leaving and elects to send her a poem. Without a final poetic exchange from the woman, he would not have final closure, but unfortunately the woman refuses to reply. With her poetry initially sparking the Assistant Director's interest, and her poetry demonstrating her character more vividly than her strange behavior, both physical appearance and behavior are inferior to poetry in evaluating the character of a woman.

In some instances, simply the exchange of poetry—even if the poems were unskillfully dull and unromantic—was sufficient at eliciting positive emotional responses from their recipients. For example, following a long period of silence from Kaneie, the Kagerō Lady receives a letter from him suggesting a visit. Following a short exchange of poetry, the Kagerō Lady records the communication as being pleasing, and impelled by the break in poetic silence, Kaneie goes to visit her (Arntzen 83). Yet the author's definition of a “good” poetic exchange is unrelated to its poetic content. She assesses the exchange as being pleasing solely on the grounds of their poetic correspondence being reanimated from its silent degradation. In other words, it does not matter that their poems may not be high-quality or sentimentally optimistic, it is simply good enough that they are once again exchanging poetry. The high regard the Kagerō Lady demonstrates for the value of poetic exchange sheds light on the essential quality of poetry as a woman's sole

method of romantic communication. While it is likely that the Kagerō Lady was receiving prosaic prose letters of request from Kaneie, these obviously would not include the romantic sentiments necessary to mend the couple's strained relations. Without this exchange of romantic poems, she could only guess at her lover's feelings, and is forced by convention to wait for the arrival of romantic guarantees in poetic form.

In fact, without poetic exchange, a woman's sole knowledge of her husband's whereabouts and activities would have come to her through rumors. Oftentimes, these would be highly distorted and disheartening, so a woman would undoubtedly prefer a poem over gossip. The Kagerō Lady seems to be constantly discouraged by the lack of poems from Kaneie, and she implies that he lacks the cultural aptitude necessary for polite poetic correspondence. By only sending poetry when it was convenient for him, rather than on occasions that conventionally required the composition of a poem (for example, a night of strong winds, a heavy rain, a change in the seasons, and so on), Kaneie was forfeiting the success of their relationship to rumor. Although Kaneie's acts of courtship to other women were obvious, he made little attempt to hide his behavior, and the Kagerō Lady laments that she would be happier if he had hid his affairs. Had he but concealed his other relationships and continued to profess his love to the Kagerō Lady in a timely and warranted fashion through poetry, their marriage would not have been soured by rumor. A man could hide his affairs, and silence rumors, but without passionate love poems sent to his lover, he risked failing at courtship.

Poetry's emotional superiority was not limited to silencing gossip; it was also more powerful than physical expressions of love. When Kaneie sends a poem to inform the Kagerō Lady that he will visit on a particular night, she feels cheated when he

actually does (Arntzen 64–5). Her reaction is initially confusing, as one expects Kaneie's willingness to show up in person to be a clearly heartfelt indication of his love. At the very least, one expects a personal visit to be emotionally superior to a piece of pretty paper professing love. Yet by replying to his initial poem, the Kagerō Lady desires above all else to continue to engage in an exchange of poetry. To her, poetic correspondence constituted a realm of emotional sincerity attainable only to those who participated in its exchange. So when Kaneie responds with a visit rather than with a poem, the Kagerō Lady feels shortchanged by his poetic aversion, instead longing for future poetry to indicate his true feelings. The Kagerō Lady's preference indicates poetry's dominance over physical expression in conveying sincere romantic sentiments.

The Prince in *The Izumi Shikibu Diary* understands this importance. He has difficulty in finding time to visit Izumi Shikibu, but unlike Fujiwara no Kaneie, Izumi Shikibu's prince remains completely faithful in his correspondence. One day when the rain was especially heavy and the wind described as terribly frightful, the author wonders if her lover is worried about her during the storm. As if reading her mind, he wishes to know how the dreadful howling of the wind is affecting her and composes:

| | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>karehatete</i> | Thoroughly withered, |
| <i>ware yori hoka ni</i> | none other than me to see |
| <i>tohu hito mo</i> | and to inquire. |
| <i>arashi no kaze wo</i> | Hearing the winds of the storm, |
| <i>ikaga kikiran</i> | I wonder how you feel (Nomura 69). |

Upon reading it, the author is overcome with feelings for his compassion and his concern for her brings her a glow of pleasure. She temporarily forgets how long it has been since he last visited her. By sending poems when they were most needed, and maintaining frequent correspondence, the Prince is able to overcome quarrels and recriminations to

successfully conclude his courtship to Izumi Shikibu in marriage. Physical expressions of love were outweighed in importance by poetry for building, maintaining, and concluding their relationship, and without it, their relationship could not have advanced to increased levels of intimacy.

The preference of poetically expressed sentiments over other forms was not limited to women. When feelings were in doubt and questions of faithfulness arose, men also welcomed warm, heartfelt poems. In *The Izumi Shikibu Diary*, the apparent fickleness of the author that her lover unjustly accuses her of on many occasions perpetuates the emotional rift that divides them. He sends a letter proclaiming his recent dissatisfaction with rumors surrounding her (Cranston 176). Not wasting any words, he suggests forgetting that he ever knew her, and laments that their relationship should have sunken so low. With a desire to appease his concerns, her reply to his poem is critical:

“If it is true that you feel as you have said,

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| <i>ima no ma ni</i> | At this point in time, |
| <i>kimi kimasanan</i> | I wish that you would come here. |
| <i>kohishi tote</i> | I adore you, but |
| <i>na mo aru mono wo</i> | I have a reputation. |
| <i>ware yukan ya wa</i> | Could I really go to you? (Nomura 67)” |

She responds to his suspicions with a concern for his wellbeing: as long as she has a scandalous reputation, how could she possibly subject him to the same fate by going to him as he asks? He replies:

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| <i>kimi wa sa wa</i> | You worry like this |
| <i>na no tatsu koto wo</i> | about your reputation? |
| <i>omohikeri</i> | This is what I think: |
| <i>hito kara kakaru</i> | depending on the person, |
| <i>kokoro to zo miru</i> | your heart appears to vary (Nomura 67). |

His response acknowledges her concern and yet teases her for her pessimistic worrying. She realizes he is simply playing with her, and takes consolation in the knowledge that her poem successfully proved her sincerity. Without her poetic reply, the Prince would have been forced to trust the disgraceful rumors circulating around her name.

Poetry's Importance as a Literary Function

Perhaps one of the more obvious, though overlooked, literary functions of poetry was its use as an indication of romance within a relationship. An author's literary decision to include poetry in his/her work was clear proof that romance was in the hearts of those from which the poetry originated. For example, almost all of Genji's amorous love affairs in *The Tale of Genji* are preceded by an exchange of poetry, and readers can gain an understanding of Genji's romantic interests based upon which women he sends poems to while exiled in Suma. The Akashi Lady, as well as Lady Murasaki—two of Genji's most beloved romantic interests—exchange numerous poems with the Shining Genji that Murasaki Shikibu, the author, writes about in her work.

To draw a contemporary comparison, these poetic exchanges are perhaps equivalent in narrative function to modern-day cinematic "love scenes." Such scenes originate from ambiguous emotions between two characters and conclude with a physical consummation of love whose function is to unmistakably resolve any uncertainty regarding the character's romantic sentiments. Apart from their obvious differences, Heian-era poetic exchange and intimate, contemporary cinematic scenes share a common narrative function: they solidify the passion that two characters share. Even just the

suggestion of physical intimacy is oftentimes enough to convey shared sentiments in a movie, and an exchange of love poems effectively served the same purpose in a Heian-era work. A tenth century Japanese author was wise to include poetic exchange as a guaranteed means of purporting the existence of reciprocated passions.

In contrast, an absence of poetic exchanges in a literary work functioned as a clear indication of a *lack* of romantic sentiment in a relationship. For example, in her diary, *As I Crossed A Bridge of Dreams*, the author Lady Sarashina does not record a single poem exchanged with her husband, although the diary includes many poems and poetic exchanges. In fact, very little is written about him at all, and as readers we progress several chapters before learning of their marriage. This is not surprising, considering the prosaic nature of most Heian-era arranged marriages was deleterious to romantic pastimes such as poetry exchange, but what is interesting is an author's aversion to including them in a work. After all, even poetry composed without sentimental inspiration could still be perfectly formed and compositionally skillful. Yet with poetry as the reflection of one's soul, without sincere emotional sentiment propelling a poet to compose a poem, his composition would be lacking the required emotional "affective" element of skillful poetry. A nobleman who takes a primary wife through an arranged marriage, whether it is for political or conventional reasons, is a nobleman with little reason for sentimental expression. As the marriage is already arranged, he simply has to perform the poetic rituals required of him to consummate the marriage. Likewise, the poetry for a man in an arranged marriage lacking passion will reflect such a deficiency and therefore not be emotionally effective.

In addition to illustrating narrative romantic indifference, an absence of poetic exchange fulfills a secondary function. With unromantic relationships marked by a lack of poetry, and romantic relationships characterized by their abundance of poetic exchanges, there is an apparent difference in the type of romantic relationships—a difference that is marked by a discrepancy in the degree of sentiment expressed. To represent the difference, a writer would choose not to include poetic exchanges to provide a clearer picture of a relationship suffering from a lack of passion. While the difference between the two expressively gauges the degree of passion present in a relationship, this function is used so frequently that it effectively becomes a literary convention. At the same time, situating a poetry-filled relationship such as the one described in *The Izumi Shikibu Diary* as romantically superior to a union lacking poetry, the absence of poetry highlights the uninspired lifelessness of arranged marriages. With such unions promoted by a woman's family for political reasons and rarely taking into considerations the feelings of those involved, they were typically dull and businesslike in comparison to truly romantic relationships laced with poetic exchange. In *As I Cross A Bridge of Dreams*, Lady Sarashina's poetry is exchanged with her romantic interest, Minamoto no Sukemichi. Her sentiments towards him are clearly cast in a romantic light through her written description, and readers can easily gain an understanding of the nature of each respective relationship based simply upon the amount of poetry included (Morris 1971, 84–8).

In Conclusion

Poetry was necessary for the initiation of a romantic relationship: it was effective, and no other equally effective and socially acceptable form of communication between men and women existed. In virtually all instances of courtship we find the initiation of a relationship begins with an exchange of poetry. When it does not, as with *kaimami* scenes or physical encounters, the amorous male is portrayed as breaking social convention, and his breach of etiquette is further clarified through highlighting the unusualness of the resulting relationship. Without poetry, the development of romantic relationships would be impossible. While highlighting the importance of poetry for Heian-era aristocratic romantic courtship has been the goal of this paper, it may be worthwhile to consider in the future the importance of poetry in non-romantic aristocratic relationships. With only five of the twenty books of the *Kokinshū* dedicated to love, it is obvious poetry fulfilled a much larger role than simple romantic correspondence in Heian society.

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